

OLD!

retro* GAMER

THEN AND NOW

FIRST LAUNCHED OVER THREE YEARS AGO, RETRO GAMER HAS GONE ON TO BECOME AN ESSENTIAL PURCHASE FOR ANYONE WITH A LOVE OF RETRO GAMING. TO CELEBRATE THE LAUNCH OF OUR FIRST EMAG, WE DECIDED TO LOCK DARRAN JONES AND MARTYN CARROLL IN A ROOM IN ORDER TO DISCOVER THE MAGAZINE'S RICH HISTORY



» This is the original cover mock-up, date-stamped August 2003. It was designed by Tym Leckey, who laid out *Amiga Computing* magazine for IDG in the 1990s. And it showed.

Darran: When did you decide that the time was right to produce a retro magazine?

Martyn: The idea of a retro gaming magazine was first mentioned around 2002. The publisher had this grand plan of filling half the pages with classified ads and making thousands out of people selling retro stuff, but when he realised that people already used eBay for doing that, the idea was dropped outright. Then about a year later, the idea resurfaced again, this time as a premium-priced magazine full of retro features and with a coverdisc slapped on the front. This was around August 2003. A cover was mocked up and I was asked start work on the magazine in November.

Darran: How long did the first issue take to create and what problems did you encounter?

Martyn: The first issue had to be finished before we broke up for Christmas, which gave me just over three weeks to pull everything together. Doing any single issue in three weeks is mad, but trying to do a

launch issue in three weeks is just stupid. To compound matters, I was already editing three other magazines at the time (two awful kids' comics and a console cheats mag). There was no freelance budget allocated either so I had to call on friends for favours. Aaron Birch, who at the time was a staff writer on one of Live's PC mags, wrote several pieces under various false names to make it look like we had some semblance of a team. I got a couple of old school mates to contribute articles for free, and other Live employees chipped in where and when they could (John Southern was called on to bang out the Sinclair feature in one weekend). Most of my contributions were merely updates of articles I'd written for a genre movie mag called *The Dark Side*. I'd been lowered to ripping off myself!

Darran: How did you go about assembling the original team?

Martyn: A few days after the magazine was given the green light, I went along to the Micro Mart show at the NEC where

I met Shaun Bebbington for the first time. Shaun had organised a small retro section with a few classic computers and coin-ops on display. I'd read his Micro Mart retro column before so we had a brief chat and I told him about the proposed magazine. He was keen so I asked him if he'd like to contribute. Other writers came on board after they'd seen the first issue and emailed me with article suggestions. Richard Burton and David Crookes were the first and I'm chuffed that they still write the magazine today. They were followed by Simon Brew, Jonti Davies, Alex Carroll (no relation) and Craig Vaughan. So basically people contacted me rather than the other way around, and as long as their pitch was convincing I'd sign them up. I didn't know any of the writers beforehand except for Kim Wild who had written several game guides for me pre-RG. I knew she had an interest in retro so was delighted when she asked to contribute.

Darran: Retro Gamer was originally going to be a quarterly magazine, what made you change your mind?

Martyn: The magazine went from quarterly to bi-monthly to monthly in the space of four issues. The official line was because the magazine was selling so well and in a way that was kind of true. The real reason, however, was that Live was convinced that another publisher would see the strong sales of the first two issues and launch a competing title. Unlike Live, no other publisher would be daft enough to launch a magazine in three weeks, so it was assumed that we had a good three months to establish Retro Gamer and get the community on side before someone like Future Publishing stepped up to the mark. They never did of course.

Darran: Why did so many top-ten styled lists appear in the first issues of the magazine?

Martyn: It was just quick and dirty filler copy. When you're persuading people to write stuff for free it obviously helps if it's easy to knock together. I should point out that the Top 100 Games feature in issue one was mainly included because there was a very real possibility that there wouldn't be a second issue. I was told that if the first issue bombed the mag would be canned outright, so I tried to make the issue work as a one-off just in case the axe fell. But looking back it just looks pretentious now.

Darran: Do you feel there was too much focus on hardware in the earlier issues?

Martyn: No, not really. There was usually just one hardware feature in each issue,



as there is now. I admit that some of the hardware features were a bit too techy in places, for my taste at least, but feedback suggested that a lot of readers enjoyed them. I got more complaints when we watered stuff down rather than the other way round.

Darran: Is there anything about Retro Gamer that you would have done differently?

Martyn: There were things I would have liked to have changed but couldn't in my humble position, such as the price (breaking the five-pound barrier was short-sighted and greedy) and the cover disc (all Live mags had one so it was there to stay, no matter what). My biggest personal regret was not giving specific commissions to freelancers. I basically gave the writers a deadline date and a rough word limit and left them to get on with it. The benefit of this was that they weren't restricted by templates and often turned in some truly excellent, individual pieces. The downside was that it was a complete nightmare to manage. I was never quite sure how many pages an article would run to until it turned up, and then the hacked-off designer had to try and make it all magically fit. It always

fell apart in the last week and we spent many a deadline working through the night.

Darran: How important do you feel the cover discs were?

Martyn: They went some way to justifying the price, even if they cost around 25p to physically produce and yet lumped a pound on the cover price. I think they helped early on in attracting people who might have otherwise passed over the mag, but generally most readers were fully aware that most of the content could be easily downloaded from the web. It's a difficult one because the debate about whether the cover disc should be bought back appears on the current forum every other month, so some folks obviously appreciated them.

Darran: How easy was it to create content for them?

Martyn: It was a pain. There was no dedicated disc editor (obviously) so I compiled all the discs myself, and it usually took me two or three days – time that I should have spent editing the mag. Sometimes I was lucky in that we'd have some exclusive content, but mostly I'd just download some freeware games, throw



» **Left:** A fresh-faced Martyn Carroll, pictured shortly after joining Live Publishing as a staff writer in 2000. **Right:** Forgive Darran Jones for looking smug, he's just landed his dream job at the all-new Retro Gamer.



» The directors of Imagine Publishing have strong ties with Oliver Frey, so it was only natural that his distinctive art would soon start appearing.

“THE TOP 100 GAMES FEATURE IN ISSUE ONE WAS INCLUDED BECAUSE THERE WAS A POSSIBILITY THAT THERE WOULDN'T BE A SECOND ISSUE. I WAS TOLD THAT IF THE FIRST ISSUE BOMBED THE MAG WOULD BE CANNED”

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» While the earlier Live Publishing covers were often criticised for their lack of creativity, you can't really do much with a big DVD case.

» Staff got to meet readers, retro fans and Matthew Smith at the first Classic Gaming Expo UK, held on a very hot weekend in July 2004.



» The original Retro Gamer was one of the first magazines to actively support the homebrew scene, as this in-depth interview with Cronosoft proves.

in a few emulators for good measure and then dress it up in a nice inlay.

Darran: What was the best disc and why?
Martyn: It has to be the one with the Konix videos and the Hewson back catalogue. The Konix stuff was just brilliant and I remember being absolutely thrilled when I first viewed the footage. I also loved the C64 audio CD that Chris Abbott kindly provided.

Darran: How easy was it to secure back catalogues from companies such as Gremlin and Hewson?

Martyn: It was easier than you'd perhaps think because we just went to companies cap-in-hand and asked if we could cover mount some of their old games. Often we'd just stumble across opportunities. For example, I went to see a company called Jester Interactive about some of its upcoming GBA releases, and its PR guy happened to mention that they owned the Hewson back catalogue. We asked if we could cover mount the games in return for plugging its upcoming releases and that was that. It was give and take. Similarly, I interviewed the boss of Elite Systems and he told me that they owned the Durell back catalogue, and it went from there. Amazingly, a lot of the people we approached either read Retro Gamer or had at least heard of it, so conversations always got off to a good start.



Darran: Do you have any funny stories about creating the first few issues?

Martyn: It's all a bit of a blur to be honest. However, I'll never forget the publisher looking at issue one and congratulating our ad sales lady on getting Epson on board. He'd been looking at the advertisements from 1983 at the back of the magazine.

Darran: When did you first start to notice a drop off in sales during the Live Publishing period and what did you do to combat this?

Martyn: It's funny; at Live you were only told if the sales were particularly good or bad. If they were up or down slightly, or just held steady, there was no communication. The biggest drop was from issue three to four. The management blamed the cover-mounted music CD not being to everyone's taste, but I was convinced that the bubble had burst early. I think I was right because sales continued to slide, albeit slowly. They levelled out around issue ten and we were left with what was probably our core audience. The whole 'Volume 2' charade was a way of generating some new interest in the magazine by including lots of shorter, regular features, catering more for console fans,

and making everything more digestible. However, I think we only succeeded in short-changing those readers who'd subscribed or bought the magazine based on the earlier issues.

Darran: What do you think of the relaunched Retro Gamer?

Martyn: I like it a lot and some of the recent issues have been very strong. It's certainly more professional looking than the Live magazine thanks to the template design and the higher production values all-round. The "Making of" features are my favourite – I really wish I'd included more of those in the Live mag.

Darran: Where do you think Retro Gamer can go next?

Martyn: I think as the years pass and more games and systems become retro, and hence harder to find, RG could widen the collecting angle. I always imagined that the magazine would one day become like a retro gaming version of Record Collector, where a programmer, software house or system is covered in detail and then there's a large focus on how much



» The beginning of our eight-page Sonic the Hedgehog feature to celebrate the blue hero's 15th birthday.

RETRO GAMER: THEN AND NOW

» Some people accused Retro Gamer for giving far too much coverage to *Jet Set Willy* creator Matthew Smith...



related items are worth. People love knowing that something they own is worth a bob or two, even if they'll probably never part with it. I'd go as far as including price lists for various systems – like the ones Digital Press produce.

Darran: Why do you think Retro Gamer receives such a supportive fan base?

Martyn: It would be easy to say it's because it's a niche magazine and such titles always attract a dedicated readership, but I really think that Retro Gamer has become something of a focal point, pulling together the various retro communities on the web. And that's not easy to achieve when you consider how disparate and diverse (and defensive) some of these groups are. It shows that RG is managing to find that elusive balance between 8-bit and 16-bit, computers and consoles, nostalgia and the scene. There's still some way to go but it's certainly moving in the right direction.

Martyn: What was your overall opinion of the original Retro Gamer?

Darran: If I'm brutally honest I wasn't a huge fan of the Live Publishing days. There were certainly features I liked



» Live's marketing maharishi Tony Allen in a promotion shot that appeared in trade journal *MCV*.

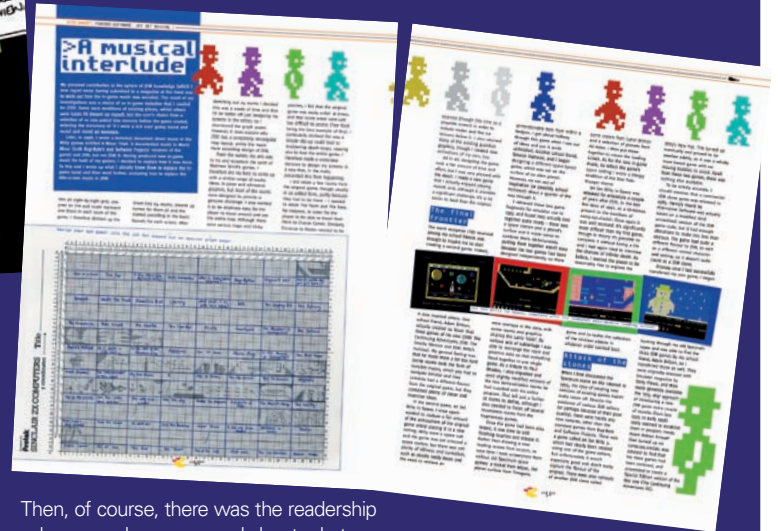
about it and it was definitely a very brave move on Live Publishing's part – I'd been pitching a similar magazine at Highbury, but to no avail – but I wasn't its biggest fan. To be fair though, this was mainly because I was working on *games™* at the time and felt that Live Publishing was trying to cash in on our retro section. Arrogant I know, hey, but I can be arrogant sometimes. I've lost count of the times that I'd leave a sarky comment on their forums saying that a feature was extremely similar to one I'd written a month or two previously, but luckily that's all in the past. So I welcomed the opportunity to meet up with you at the very last CGEUK and we sorted out our differences over a few beers.

Martyn: Was it a difficult decision to leave Highbury and take the reins at RG?

Darran: It was very difficult. You have to remember that back then Imagine was seen to be a very unstable company (at least from a Highbury point of view) as it hadn't even been around for six months. Also, I'm a family man and I couldn't make any rash decisions that would affect my wife and two children, so I gave it some very serious thought. On the other hand I once told Simon Phillips (who was my editor on *games™*) that I'd follow him to hell and back, so after making a grand claim like that, I felt I should follow it through, seeing he was nice enough to offer me my dream job.

Martyn: Were you worried that RG may have attracted a negative image after the Live fallout?

Darran: Definitely. I remember reading some very nasty comments on the old retro survival forum about how the freelancers had been treated by Live and I knew that I was going to have a hard time convincing some of them to work for me.



» The Jet Set Willy loving continues. To be fair though, he didn't really receive more coverage than any other popular videogame character.

Then, of course, there was the readership who were also concerned about what would happen if Retro Gamer ever came back (at that point no one knew that Imagine had been looking at buying it). Luckily, when we did finally announce Retro Gamer's return the majority of old readers were extremely happy with the news.

Martyn: How difficult was it adjusting to editing a monthly mag as opposed to the Retro section of *games™*?

Darran: It was a bloody nightmare. Mainly because I'd never been an editor on an entire magazine before, so while I knew a few bits and bobs about the editing process, a lot of it was alien to me. Fortunately, I had some brilliant support from Damian, Mark, Simon and various freelancers, and while the first few issues were rough going, things soon started to settle down nicely.

Martyn: How did you approach the new magazine? Did you look at what worked and what didn't in the original mag, or did you basically start from scratch?

Darran: It was a little of both really. I knew there were certain elements that I wanted to keep – Desert Island Disks was a no-brainer, for example. But I was also keen to stamp my own authority on the mag, and was eager to introduce new ideas that I had been saving for my Highbury mag and the retro section of *games™*. Initially we started a series called 'The Classic Game' but it didn't really work as a four-page spread because



» When we're not using Oliver Frey or Wil Overton, we prefer iconic imagery like this.

“RETRO GAMER HAS BECOME SOMETHING OF A FOCAL POINT, PULLING TOGETHER THE VARIOUS RETRO COMMUNITIES ON THE WEB. THAT'S NOT EASY WHEN YOU CONSIDER HOW DIVERSE SOME OF THESE GROUPS ARE”

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» On joining Live in April 2004, Shaun Bebbington's first job was to uncover the contents of the Mega-tree disks using his outlandish Commodore set-up.



» Retro Gamer has always striven to produce the finest articles, having people involved in the magazine who worked in the industry at the time proved to be a huge boost.

it was far too long. If you want to hear someone rave on about how wonderful a game is you can simply head over to the internet. We felt the articles needed a little more substance and insight, so after the first two issues they were turned into Making Of's. At first we only ran two an issue, but they've proven to be so popular that we now run about five a month.

Martyn: How long did the relaunch issue take to create and what problems did you encounter?

Retro Gamer is that the writers involved need to 'know their shit' so to speak. You have to remember that the vast number of readers will probably know just as much (or maybe even more) about a certain subject as you, so you need to make sure that the writers you have are the best that you can find. People like Paul Drury, John Szczepaniak, Ashley Day, David Crookes and Shaun Bebbington had been instrumental in the success of Retro Gamer during the Live Publishing period, so they were some of the first people I



"THE VAST NUMBER OF READERS WILL PROBABLY KNOW AS MUCH (OR MAYBE MORE) ABOUT A SUBJECT AS YOU, SO YOU NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT THE WRITERS ARE THE BEST YOU CAN FIND"

» Coin-Op Conversions still appears in Retro Gamer, but like many of the older articles, it was given a new look and direction.

Darran: The biggest problem we had was time, or rather a lack of time. The issue was due to go to the printers on 21 November and I joined Imagine two weeks

earlier, so we had an insanely short time to put everything together. Most days rarely saw us leaving before midnight, but the excitement was so high that we were all simply fuelled on adrenaline. We felt it was important to get the magazine out by the end of the year and I'm delighted to say that everyone pulled together to make it so. In fact, the only downside to the short schedule was that a few grammatical howlers occasionally crept into the text. Luckily, most people were just happy that the magazine was back on the shelves, so we were able to get away with it.

Martyn: Was it important to keep some of the original writers on board?

Darran: The problem with a magazine like

was in touch with (mainly because they had already written for me when I was at Highbury). Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get hold of everyone to begin with, but now that you've unearthed a lot of old contact numbers readers can expect to see some familiar names over the coming few months.

Martyn: What's your view on the cover disc debate?

Darran: We decided from the beginning that they were a fairly pointless exercise and often entered a 'grey' area that we didn't want to get involved with. We've never ruled them out completely, but we've always said that if they were to return, it would be because the content couldn't be found anywhere else. If you look back at the previous disks, you can probably count the unique content on one hand. Another issue we now have is that a lot of companies are now very cagey about releasing their back catalogue. Because of the likes of Xbox Live Arcade and the Virtual Console, companies are now assuming that they could make more money by releasing past titles on these systems instead of a cover disc. And to be honest, I can't really blame them.



» From the history of football management to the latest Virtual Console reviews, Retro Gamer leaves no stone unturned.

» Here's a few pages from Retro Gamer 12's in-depth look at the Atari 2600.

Martyn: Have you considered any other giveaways such as bonus magazines or retro posters?

Darran: I'd love to do another Oli Frey calendar, particularly one that did his art justice, but time, as always, is usually against us. I have a few plans for future releases, but I'm certainly not going to tell you what they are now.

Martyn: Some of the covers are excellent. How difficult is it to source original artwork?

Darran: It can be quite a pain, mainly because a lot of companies don't actually archive anything. For example, I was desperate to get a specific piece of *Castlevania* art for a recent cover, but the original artwork no longer existed. Fortunately, the new art worked extremely well, mainly because it's taken from a poster that was only released in Japan. The Oliver Frey pieces happen because our art director, Mark Kendrick, used to work with him and they have a very good relationship and he's managed to keep most of his original art. I approached Wil Overton because I was a huge fan of his *Super Play* covers and he was more than happy to help us out. Every single one of his pieces has been a work of art, and it's hardly surprising that his Rare cover that he drew for issue 20 won the vote for Best Cover on our forum recently.

Martyn: You've tweaked the magazine quite a lot since you took over. Are you happy with how it stands now, particularly with the balance of content?

Darran: There's always room for improvement and one of the things that I've been guilty of lately is not giving enough support to

the online community outside of the forums. We're making amendments though and you'll see a bigger focus on the homebrew scene over the next few issues. The balance is a tricky one because you're never going to make everyone happy, mainly because they all have their own ideas of what actually constitutes retro coverage. It's somewhat telling that when people usually complain about the magazine they rarely moan about the quality of the writing, it's usually along the lines of 'I really liked/disliked this particular game or genre, so therefore this new issue is amazing/rubbish', which is a little frustrating. Still, I can appreciate that we have a broad audience and the best I can do is try and keep the magazine as balanced as possible.

Martyn: How much importance do you give to forum feedback?

Darran: I try and get on there as often as possible. I've built up a strong relationship with many of the readers there and do my best to answer their questions as quickly as possible. I don't have enough time to be there as often as I'd like, but I post regularly and try and keep everyone up to date with everything that's happening with the magazine.

Martyn: Imagine has recently announced that it plans to invest in its internet presence. Does this include RG, and if not, do you think that one day RG will be more closely integrated with the web?

Darran: I've not been told of any plans, but I don't think Retro Gamer would work as a PDF magazine or a website. There are

more than enough already covering a ridiculously wide range of retro subjects so I don't think the world needs another one right now.

Martyn: As a print title, how financially viable is Retro Gamer?

Darran: I guess the real difference between the Imagine version of Retro Gamer and its Live Publishing counterpart is that we continue to make money on the magazine, so it remains an asset to us.

Martyn: What are your plans for the magazine this year?

Darran: More content, more interaction with the readers, more great interviews, more great features, more of everything really. We're rapidly approaching the 50-issue mark. When we do expect to see something really special.

Martyn: Can readers ever look forward to another RG Christmas Edition?

Darran: I don't see why not. It's something we've discussed in the past and there's still plenty of time to plan for the end of 2007. People have said that they'd love to see a touched-up Oli cover, but I'd prefer it if he could put a new one together for us. In fact, I think I'm going to give him a ring about it now.

» When an article is created, we want it to capture as much spirit of the original game as possible.



» Retro Gamer prides itself on having features that are just as beautifully created as they are written.



» Why have just another picture of the Wii on your front cover when you can get Wil Overton to draw something amazing instead?